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ABSTRACT

Journal writing on literary topics is an ideal activity in a classroom that emphasizes the transformational role of education, bringing together the creation of meaning between the reader and the text on the one hand, and on the other hand, the creation of expressive or reflexive writing. An activity, in a freshman literature and writing class for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students, demonstrated different types of transformation in ESL students' journal writing on literary topics. Students were asked to write their impressions after their first reading of the texts. Then, guided by specific tasks, the students were asked to re-read the texts and write second entries in their journals, capturing any changes in comprehension and interpretation that occurred. The first and second journal entries for each text were compared in terms of discourse organization, the syntactic cast favored by the journal writers in topic expansion, and the lexicon. The topics identified in the first entries covered several categories including queries; comments on linguistic difficulty, drawbacks, and merits; comments on title relevance, plot structure and emotional impact; personal reactions to characters; and moral judgments. These first entries are quintessential examples of expressive writing, normally frowned upon in the classroom. Second entries were considerably more focused, with accompanying mature syntax and lexical choice. This suggests that the previous expressive writing had a definite role in the transformation, although there was no evidence that the journal was responsible for any cultural transformation. (PRA)

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Looking for a Focus: Transformations in Journal Entries(1)

Journal writing on literary topics is an ideal activity in a classroom that emphasizes the transformational role of education (Freire, 1968). Among other things, it is closely related to reader response theory, not accidentally "the strongest shaping force in the development of models for bringing the teaching of writing and literature together." (Clifford and Schilb, 1985, 46). For both readers and writers of journal entries create new meaning out of the interaction of prior, or background, knowledge and the new knowledge encountered in texts, a kind of knowledge that is further transformed at the intersection of individual (student) response and community (peers, teacher) reaction.

Journal writing on literary topics brings together the creation of meaning between the reader and the text on the one hand and, on the other hand, the creation of what was called "expressive"(Britton, 1975) or "reflexive"(Emig, 1977) writing; in other words, the creation of texts which reveal the workings of the mind in the process of comprehension, as well as of the kind of writing that such thought is likely to produce.

Pedagogically, journal writing on literary topics inscribes itself in the attempt to foster writing outside the composition

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class and across the curriculum (Young and Fulwiler, 1986). Although writing has never been neglected in literature classes, journal writing, exploratory and developmental in nature, has been used sporadically and with mixed results.

In a 1986 article, Elizabeth Flynn traces the metamorphoses of a student journal response to John Updike's "A&P", the "movement from participation to observation, from identification to critical distance" (209). This paper presents a similar attempt of identifying types of transformation in ESL students' journal writing on literary topics. It is based on just one activity in a freshman literature and writing class, possibly the only literature class these students, most of them from technical and scientific fields, will have during their college years. The class, covering three genres (short story, poetry and drama), with examples from 19th and 20th century American literature, was conceived as an interactive, meaning-constructing class, whereby the students, together with a teacher-facilitator, would jointly create the meaning of the literary texts under study; no secondary sources, no authoritative voices, no lecturing ex cathedra. The reading of each text was preceded by pre-reading discussion questions meant to activate those items of cultural information, or schemata, relevant to the understanding of the text at hand, and to deal with them in a cross-cultural fashion.

In this context of transformation, the journal was a natural choice. The students were asked to write their impressions after their first reading of the texts. Their first entries were used for discussion in class. Then, guided by specific tasks, the

students were asked to re-read the texts and write second entries in their journals, capturing any changes in comprehension and interpretation that have occurred between the first reading, through the discussion in class, to the second reading (cf. Louise Rosenblatt, 1976).

But the decision to introduce the journal into the structure of the class was more deliberate than intuitive. It was based on at least three reasons: a basic theoretical reason regarding the relationship between thought and writing, echoing Vygotsky's statement that "thought unembodied in words remains a shadow" (1962,153) or, Francoise Sagan's words, "I have to start to write to have ideas" (qtd. in Cowley, 1958); a derived pedagogical reason based on the belief that previous written thought on a topic would be a springboard for class discussion; and finally, a rather selfish reason, having to do with the investigator's work on an interactive reader for ESL students--a testing ground for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic problems that could be targeted in the post-reading activities.

The data considered in this paper come from some 90 journals, gathered over a period of three years, written by students from diverse cultural-linguistic backgrounds (Asian, South American, African, Arab) and center on the short story unit, with entries on Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path," John Steinbeck's "The Harness," William Faulkner's "The Brooch," E.A. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Ambitious Guest." (henceforth WP, H, B, FHU, AG, respectively).

The first and second journal entries for each text were

compared in terms of discourse organization, with a focus on the topics covered, the syntactic cast favored by the journal writers in topic expansion, and the lexicon. Although a few of the entries contained simple summaries of the stories, many students' favorite type of writing on literature, the majority of the writers displayed genuine interest in the fictional worlds of the texts. Thus, the topics identified in the first entries cover several categories.

(1) Queries. (e.g., "If Madeline was alive, why did they bury her?"[FHU] "What does a harness have to do in a story about people?" [B] "Why did the hunter point the gun at Grandma Phoenix?"[WP]) In a classroom without a journal, such questions are rarely raised, and misunderstandings that appear too late, in term papers, are simply penalized; teachers may never get to the source of such "errors," while students may never know what they have done wrong. The journal entries, a much safer vehicle for inquiry than the face-threatening oral questions, go to the very heart of the readers' meaning construction process, and are thus a valuable tool for understanding that process.

(2) Comments on linguistic difficulty, drawbacks, and merits. (e.g., "Faulkner's words are sometimes magic. For example, when I read the words about Howard, I see not only Howard, but also his mother."[B] "I didn't understand half of the words Poe used in his story. I guess that's why I didn't like it." [FHU]) Undoubtedly, with ESL students, much more than with native speakers, the linguistic difficulty of texts interferes with their comprehension and, consequently, with the enjoyment of literature. That may be

the main reason for the students' preference for Hawthorne's "Ambitious Guest" and their dislike of Poe's classic Gothic story. At the same time, however, ESL students pay more attention to the formal elements of the texts and are more eager to make linguistic comments.

(3) Comments on title relevance. (e.g., "The title of the story [AG] caught my attention because I had the impression as if the ambitious guest was going to do something strange." "When I first read the title of Steinbeck's story [H], I had no idea what I was going to read. I didn't even know what the word (harness) meant, so I had to look it up, but the dictionary didn't help much.") As with other types of comments, the students' first entry comments on title relevance point to the title as an important hypothesis-forming device, an idea that has been strongly supported empirically by numerous reading comprehension experiments.

(4) Comments on plot structure. (e.g., "I cannot see much movement in the story [B] and I did not find any excitement." "I was expecting a different ending for 'A Worn Path,' something more exciting." "I found the story [AG] to be predictive (sic). There were a lot of hints in the story that made the reader aware of the end.") As with the title comments, these comments reveal some of the activities during reading: the creation of hypotheses, confirmed or denied by subsequent developments in the texts, the expectations of movement, the difficulty the students experience with descriptive passages, etc.

(5) Comments on emotional impact. (e.g., "When I read this story [H], I thought that this was the first story in my life in

English when I cried." "I really hated 'The Fall of the House of Usher." I like thrillers that don't keep you waiting for ever, like 'Misery.' That's a good horror story!") Most of the first journal entries start with such comments of emotional impact, of likes and dislikes. These, along with plot summaries, are blacklisted by many teachers as examples of immature thinking. In fact, such comments throw light on the students' literary tastes, and, when accompanied by reasons, they can help teachers modify syllabi and reading lists.

(6) Personal reactions to characters. (e.g., "I don't like Howard Boyd [B] at all or I would say that I despise him very much because I get the impression that he was always his mother's baby instead of an independent young man...Such a useless man was no better than a pile of garbage." "Phoenix Jackson [WP] can be the grandmother of any of us. I feel sorry for her." "I am beginning to think that Peter Randall [H] suffers from multiple personality disorder, like The Three Faces of Eve.") The first entry comments on characters reveal the readers' personal prejudices, as well as their identification with the characters in the fictional work, or, in the words of one student, their "being inside the story."

(7) Moral judgments and comments. (e.g., "Peter Randall [H] is an alcoholic. He needs help. He deserves the boring life he has." "Daughters-in-law are never nice to their mothers-in-law. That's why Amy [B] lost the brooch Howard's mother gave her." "Peter Randall must have loved his wife. If not, he would have not waited for her to die; he would have divorced her."[H] In this category, as in the previous one, I hoped to find culture-bound

interpretations of the texts, but instead of interference with the students' traditional, family-oriented backgrounds, their comments seem to reveal a strong influence by stereotypes in American culture, as disseminated by American movies and TV. Ironically, these ESL students' interpretations and misinterpretations of the literary texts, seem to provide support for a rather strong version of the Whorfian hypothesis--the language used tends to color their moral judgments.

All of these topic categories are rarely expanded. The first journal entries, in their majority, are a concatenation of declarative, interrogative and exclamatory sentences, arranged in the sequential order of the events in the stories. It is as if the writers engaged simultaneously in the reading and writing processes, notwithstanding the advice that they write in the journal after reading the stories. The first journal entries are quintessential examples of "expressive writing:" exploratory, inquisitive, highly personal, unadorned by precise and carefully thought out qualifiers (replete, instead, with vague but heartfelt ones, such as "boring" or "interesting," "exciting" or "dragging" or "descriptive"--synonymous with good or bad depending on the writer's perspective), unorganized by any overarching design. In short, they represent the kind of writing frequently frowned upon by most literature teachers, and rarely practiced in the classroom.

The following questions still remain: Why should we foster this kind of writing? Does it lead anywhere? Is it conducive to the development of the other kind of writing, such as the highly

praised "transactional" writing, meant to inform and persuade?

In the analysis of the second entries, we looked for elements of change, of transformation, as these were written after discussion and debate in class, after some enlightenment and more confusion, and after a second reading of the texts.

By and large, the second entries are considerably more focused, with accompanying more mature syntax and lexical choice. They address in some detail a particular character in the story, a more intriguing moment for the reader, or the general theme. Some of them continue to raise questions, but unlike the questions in the first entries, these questions can hardly be answered by the text, or by anyone else, for that matter. These are inquiries about the fate of the characters after the end of the stories; for example, "Will Grandma Phoenix be able to take the medicine back to her grandchild?" or "Did Usher know that they had buried his twin alive?" or "Is Howard going to pull the trigger?"

The following are two examples of such expanded second entries, the first one a character portrayal in B, the second a thoughtful consideration of an intriguing moment in WP:

> "Getting married is the only action Howard takes to free himself from his mother's tyranny. He takes one step to freedom and real life and then steps back: he continues to live in his mother's house. After two years of marriage, things come to a critical point. Howard knows that he will have no strength to go against his mother's will. He knows that he does not have the courage to find his way to freedom. He sits and waits. Even when his mother forces his wife to leave him, he does not take any action. At the end of the story he stops existing. He is there, but he is absent. He has lost his chance to be free. He is aware of it, and that is his tragedy."

> "Phoenix [...] ,must have experienced slavery in her time.

> As an African, I am greatly interested in how the horrid experience of slavery has affected her [...]. Certainly her sense of humanity seems to have emerged pretty much unscathed. Yet, her worth and dignity, especially in light of her age, are not acknowledged by all. This emerges for me poignantly when the young white hunter points his gun at her [...]. She does not reprimand him as she conceivably would a young black man doing the same. The point is that for neither of them does the hunter's pointing a gun at her amount to all that outrageous an act[...] Upon being asked whether she is scared of the gun, she replies, "No, sir, I seen plenty go off by, in my day, and for less than what I done." (gloss: She had picked up a nickel he had dropped, but the hunter is not aware of it.)

These are, without a doubt, "congealed" thoughts, of the kind that rarely arise on the basis of discussion alone. They are no longer "shadows;" they are thoughts that have taken definite contours. It is my claim that previous expressive writing on the stories has had a definite role in this transformation. That is not to say that the jump from expressive to transactional writing has been made on the two writing occasions the students had to respond to the literary texts, but, at the same time, it is hard to believe that the previous expressive thought and writing on the texts had nothing to do with the students' more focused approach to written reflection. As Elizabeth Flynn points out, "pedagogical structures which encourage students to read and write <u>in stages</u> also encourage them to transform their perceptions of texts which, in turn, may encourage them to transform their perceptions of their worlds and of themselves." (213, emphasis added). There is more to this statement than the truism that previous thought develops and refines subsequent thought, for what we are dealing with here is previous thought that has been articulated in personal, spontaneous writing, without any threat to the writer's public face, as it

happens in many formal academic writing assignments.

The other kind of transformation this investigation was hoping to find and examine has to do with cross-cultural perceptions. Anyone who works with students from such diverse cultural backgrounds expects them to display cross-cultural comprehension problems in their encounter with American literature texts and their worlds. Over the years, in classroom discussion, I have witnessed some such cross-cultural interpretations, in questions such as: " How can we say that a mother may destroy her son, when in fact all mothers want the best for their children?" or "How can we feel sympathy for a man who frequents fancy houses?" or "How could an immoral person such as William Faulkner receive the prestigious Nobel Prize?"

These expectations were not systematically met, however. The journal entries examined in this analysis contain little evidence of such cross-cultural interpretations. They could have easily surfaced in the students' frequent moral judgments on the characters and their actions in the stories or in their comments on emotional impact. To say that a Russian student's tears during the reading of "The Harness" is evidence of Slavic sentimentality or that a Chinese student's decree that a useless man such as Howard Boyd in Faulkner's "The Brooch" is "a pile of garbage" are examples of cross-cultural reading is simply perpetuating useless stereotypes. Of definitely more interest is that for most of these students, some from cultures where literature and description are synonymous, descriptive passages are boring, action and excitement are anxiously sought, and Poe is a disappointment as far as horror

is concerned; that for most of these students, some from communities with strong family ties and responsibilities, divorce is the easy answer to fictional characters' marital problems; that for most of these students, some of whom come from traditional extended families, young fictional people should not live with their parents. One student asked me once in this literature class, "Did you take the bad words out of the stories?" In all of these comments there is evidence of a strong cultural transformation, a transformation that had already taken place when the students encountered the stories--a transformation for which we, as educators, cannot claim any responsibility.

NOTES

(1) This paper was presented at the College Composition and Communication Conference, in Cincinnati, OH, in March 1992.

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